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Intrigue Deep Beneath the Briny Deep

The CIA is, you might say, "Flipping" its lid over reports that the Soviets are training dolphins for military and espionage missions. Worse, they stole the idea from us.

Their inspiration was not the movie "Day of the Dolphin," in which some bad guys kidnaped George C. Scott's talking porpoise and trained it to attach an explosive device to the bottom of a ship. Nor did they get the idea from clandestine visits to Marineland.

A top-secret CIA report states that the Soviets' fighting fish program "closely resembles that in the United States and apparently was stimulated by a U.S. Navy demonstration of the military value of marine mammals." The Navy began its studies in 1960 with a dolphin named "Notty," trying to determine whether the beast had any special characteristics that could be built into the design of underwater missiles.

One of the Navy's most successful tests involved a dolphin named "Tuffy," which carried tools and messages to aquanauts 200 feet below the surface in the 1965 Sea Lab II project off La Jolla, Calif. That's the caper that apparently hooked the Soviets.

The Soviet program began that very year, and the CIA reports that "the quality of Soviet research has improved steadily and in many areas is comparable" to the Navy's.

The Top Secret Umbra CIA report, slipped to my associate Dale Van

Atta, says the Russian navy may be "training dolphins to perform various military and intelligence tasks... [which] could include attaching intelligence-collection packages and other devices to enemy submarines, and helping divers recover equipment from the ocean floor."

In addition, Soviet scientists are trying to learn more about the way dolphins are able to locate objects under water through the use of echoes.

"The Soviets hope to use the results of this research in developing advanced sonar systems, more efficient hull designs for submarines and surface ships, and improved shapes for torpedoes," the CIA reports.

The Soviet dolphin project reportedly involves five Black Sea research stations, including small bio-acoustics laboratories and a dolphinarium.

Like just about everything else in the U.S.-Soviet competition, each side must come up with countermeasures to nullify the other's new weapon. Here the Soviets may have opened a dolphin gap.

In one Soviet test, according to another CIA report, the Russian experts were able to "estimate... a dolphin's ability to detect an object containing an active acoustical emitter under adverse background noise conditions."

And this, the CIA explains, "could enable the Soviets to evaluate the potential benefits of developing acous-

tical jamming countermeasures to U.S. Navy dolphin programs...."

But don't think the Navy has been napping on the quarterdeck. Evidently alarmed at the possibility that its Fighting Flipper Force might be incapacitated by Soviet jamming, the Navy has broadened its research to include sea lions and whales.

In "Project Quick Find," sea lions were trained to locate instrument-laden missiles and other test ordnance fired into the ocean, and to attach recovery hardware to them.

And in "Project Deep Ops," a pilot whale and two killer whales demonstrated an ability to recover objects from even greater depths than that at which the sea lions operated. The pilot whale proved particularly adept. It learned how to attach a lift bag, which inflated at hookup, to a dummy torpedo resting on the ocean floor 1,654 feet down.

Our Blubber Brigade should give the Soviets something to chew on.